

On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts

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A Final Journey

Spawning king salmon targeted on big lake, rivers

By Dick Ellis



Captain Andy Derwinski sets lures targeting September king salmon staging in pre-spawn just outside the Kenosha Harbor

Not much more than a stone's throw off of Pikes Creek trickling into Lake Michigan just north of the Kenosha Harbor, those of us watching rods or working cameras onboard Jedi Sportfishing Charters were thankful we had taken our Dramamine. Giant rollers swelled to a massive seven and eight feet and the eastern horizon disappeared and reappeared as we rocked with the waves.

Great Lakes skippers Andy Derwinski and Steve Hunt worked the wheel and set the rods in just 12 feet of water for egg-laden salmon that could weigh as much as 25 pounds. The fish were nearing the end of their life cycle and would soon travel

up the tributaries of Lake Michigan where they had been released four years earlier, spawn, and die.

On board was Brad Gilbertson, Director of the Park & Rec department in Sparta Wisconsin who had won a day in the field with this column during archery competition sponsored by Mathews Inc. at a Sparta Rotary Club Outdoor Expo last summer. His guests included Todd Schneider of McHenry, Illinois and Edward Martin of Wausau Wisconsin.

"I like to fish but I wanted to try something different," said Gilbertson of his trip choice targeting king salmon on Lake Michigan. "I always wanted to get out here and try to catch some of these big salmon." Obviously,

Sparta, located east of Lacrosse on Wisconsin's west side, doesn't allow daily salmon fishing or a day on the Great Lake.

The two veteran captains of 30-foot Jedi vessel decked out to target Kings worked J-Plugs over the shallow water and rocks for another strike. But found little cooperation from the rough seas that continued to grow nastier by the minute. Gilbertson had already tangled and won a battle with one Chinook. But now, not even two hours into the trip, not even the automatic pilot could hold a set course against the push blowing in from the southeast.

The same Mother Nature that would enable us to pinpoint exactly where the King salmon would be in late September would also chase us from the water early. Unlike the summer months, when charter captains from harbors all along Lake Michigan might travel four miles out on the lake to find fish in water depths well over 100 feet, they know the big, four year kings will

be congregating and waiting for rain to trigger the spawning migration upstream.

"The 15 to 25 pound, four year old fish are staging here to spawn and die," said Derwinski. "You can catch fish up here that will be rusty-colored and ready to spurt eggs. The next one will still be beautiful silver and not ready yet. You can see the shore fishermen fishing for these salmon on the beach by Pike Creek. The water is low. Rain will trigger that run up the creek. We used to come down there with a shovel in low water conditions and make a channel and just a trickle of water to the creek. The salmon would come right in there. If we don't get rain soon this fishing outside of the rivers is really going to be hot."



A Chinook salmon taken by Brad Gilbertson of Sparta, Wisconsin is netted by Captain Andy Derwinski of Jedi Sportfishing Charters off of Pikes Creek near the Kenosha Harbor.



Unlike the natural reproduction of Lake Superior fish species, Lake Michigan salmon and trout are raised in DNR fish hatcheries and released in tributaries. The Root River Wehr facility in Racine allows state biologists to capture adult brood stock for that task returning to the tributaries from the big lake to spawn.

The only other charter boat crazy enough to challenge Lake Michigan scooted for harbor. We followed suit, and Gilbertson and I traveled north to Racine to see the Root River Steelhead Facility where salmon are captured and eggs taken by DNR fish biologists for hatching, rearing and release back into the tributaries. Although we knew we were early, Gilbertson also flyfished the Root for any salmon that could already be in the river. We sighted a few salmon in the very shallow water, but we knew the big show was yet to come.

“The captains did what they could in very tough conditions,” Gilbertson said during an interview from Sparta the next day. “But I am tempted to run over to the Root River again. You just know the salmon are going to be running very soon.” Due to the unique weather conditions, this trip didn’t count as Gilbertson’s trip, so look for his name in this column again soon. He’s just fun to have around anyway. Contact Captain Andy Derwinski at Jedi Sportfishing Charters at 414-788-6603 or www.jedisportfishing.com. Contact Captain Steve Hunt and Hunter’s Charters at 262-914-9100 or www.hunterscharters.com. They’re network can accommodate a few anglers to corporate groups up to 120 anglers. *W*

Plenty of time for shore and boat salmon anglers

Although the weather and high rollers surely made our quest for staging salmon difficult, shore and boat anglers still have ample time to get in on great action north and south on Lake Michigan, according to Department of Natural Resources (DNR) fisheries experts. “October is a great time for fishing and for fish watching in the rivers, said Matt Coffaro, DNR fisheries biologist. “Jumping salmon put on quite a show. In the Milwaukee area the Chinook are already starting to stage around the harbors and river mouths in anticipation of their spawning runs which should peak in early October.”

Some of the best viewing for watching the huge King, often called Chinook salmon, and the smaller Coho salmon caught for egg-taking purposes will be at the DNR’s three egg collection facilities; In Racine at the Root River Steelhead Facility; in Kewaunee at the C.D. Buzz Besadny Fish Facility; and in Sturgeon Bay at the Strawberry Creek Spawning Facility. For example, every year as many as 6,000 Chinook and 2,000 Coho pas through the Wehr facility in Racine, and eggs and sperm taken from spawning fish assures the fish will be hatched raised and released as six-inch smolts in Lake Michigan tributaries.

They return to those mother streams to spawn and die after spending their life on the big lake. Sport fishermen are waiting and the artificial spawning process at the DNR collection stations begins again. Lake Michigan tributaries do not provide the proper habitat to allow natural reproduction, like on Lake Superior.

Fish watching at the C.D. “Buzz” Besadny Fish Facility in Kewaunee will kick into high gear this week and continue through the entire month of October, unless rains trigger early runs, according to Facility Supervisor Mike Baumgartner.

“People can get eye to eye with Chinook and Coho salmon, steelhead and brown trout through our viewing window



Brad Gilbertson’s flyline slices the sky over the Root River in Racine as the angler looks for spawning king salmon on their final spawning journey off of Lake Michigan. A few fish were in, but most remain staging on Lake Michigan at the river mouth, waiting for more rain to trigger migration upstream

as the fish navigate through a bypass channel and up the fish ladder,” Baumgartner said. “They can also watch staff processing fish here on select days during the run”

The Kewaunee facility will be hosting its 7th open house on October 4 from 9:00 a.m. to 3 p.m. Activities will include educational tours, fly ting and casting demonstrations, fish printing, horse and wagon rides, good food and of course the salmon spawning show.

In Sturgeon Bay, the Strawberry Creek facility will also offer Chinook viewing opportunities within the next few weeks. The fish are staging in the channel and spawning is expected to begin the first week of October. Call ahead for specific times.

Though not as well known, Lake Superior puts on a similar but smaller scale show. “We have a much larger run of Coho in our tributaries than Chinook,” said Mike Seider, Bayfield Fisheries biologist. “In late September and October, Big Rock near Washburn is a really neat spot to watch Coho running up from the rapids.”

More information on the fish spawning facilities, including locations and contact numbers, check the DNR website at www.dnr.state.wi.us/ Call ahead for current fish watching conditions. *W*